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ABSTRACT

Some writing teachers believe that one-to-one conferencing with students in the classroom, used as a primary method of instruction on the theory that teaching less means learning more, gives students the time and personal attention they need to become competent writers. In order to ascertain current beliefs and practices of conferencing in the composition classroom, a study surveyed 100 full-time instructors of writing at 11 different colleges, examining: (1) attitudes teachers have regarding the effectiveness of their current approach in teaching writing; (2) student attentiveness; (3) attitudes to the writing conference; (4) amount of class or out-of-class time devoted to the conference; (5) the effectiveness of such a conference; (6) the reasons instructors have for initiating such a conference; (7) favored locations for conducting a conference; and (8) the questions most frequently asked by instructors during a writing conference. In general, results indicated that while most teachers believe conferencing with students is more valuable than providing written comments on essays, and have conferences several times a term, almost none use it as a primary method of instruction. Reasons for this include lack of time, uncertainty about how to integrate conferences into their classrooms, and satisfaction with current methods used. (SR)

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ABSTRACT

The When, Where, How, and Why of Conferencing:

A Summary and Interpretation of a Teacher Survey

"The When, Where, How, and Why of Conferencing: A Summary and Interpretation of a Teacher Survey" analyzes the results of a survey distributed to over 100 composition instructors at eleven colleges and universities ranging in size and region. In recent years, many instructors have found tradtional approaches to teaching writing to be unsuccessful and have abandoned these approaches in favor of the student/teacher writing workshop, a classroom conference about student writing. Some teachers continue to hold class discussions to teach rhetorical techniques, but combine these methods with the writing conference. The purpose of this survey is to determine the attitudes instructors have about the writing conference, the amount of class or out-of-class time devoted to the conference, the overall effectiveness of such a conference, the reasons instructors have for initiating such a conference, and a list of favored locations for conducting the conference. Also included is a sampling of most frequently asked questions by instructors during the writing conference.

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The When, Where, How, and Why of Conferencing: A Summary and Interpretation of a Teacher Survey

For the last nine and a half years of my teaching career, I began every morning following the same routine. I'd get up, just barely an hour before my first class, flip on my local radio station, stagger around my apartment with a cup of caffeine, trying to collect myself enough to get dressed and then go out and teach. And, it was always during this time that I would mentally rehearse what I was going to say to my composition students that day. But, one day, two falls ago, at 6:30 a.m., my usual morning routine and afterward, my teaching routine were forever altered. On that morning, while stuffing my book bag with ditto after ditto covering every conceivable usage error known to man, or at least to English teachers, and while recalling everything I could about the rhetorical mode for the new writing assignment I was going to introduce, my thoughts were jarred by the glitzy ramblings of my local radio disc jockey who with perverse glee announced:

> This is for all you teachers out there who are getting ready for yet another dreary school day. According to a recent sociological survey, nearly 80% of all students sitting in your classroom aren't listening to anything you say; they're doodling or daydreaming. The 64 of the 80% who are thinking are thinking about sex, and I bet that's a hard act for you to follow. If I were you, I'd stay at home, crawl back into bed 'cause you're wastin' your time.

And with that, I snapped off the radio, grabbed my ditto-filled bag and strutted out the door, knowing that my lecture on comma splices and comparison/

contrast couldn't compete with sexual fantasies and whatever else my students did or did not have on their minds.

While I'm not completely certain of the accuracy or the source of these comments, especially from a man who publically identifies himself as "Tony the Tune-Maker," I have to admit that his words had left their mark. For the first time, I experienced a jolt into the reality I had so long suppressed. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, my approach to teaching writing, standing before the group, chalk in hand, scribbling out rule after rule, rhetorical paradigm after paradigm on the board simply didn't permit real learning, and day to day instruction of this type doesn't give students the time and personal attention they need to become good or at least competent writers. I had to finally acknowledge that while I had the best intentions, I was probably reaching only half of my students, if that. After that fateful morning, I decided to significantly modify my methods of teaching writing by spending less time teaching and more time listening, talking with students about their writing, using more one-to-one conferencing with my students in the classroom as my primary method of writing instruction.

As Dan Kirby and Tom Liner point out in their text Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing, "extraordinarily successful teachers of writing have one thing in common: they spend little time in isolation, reading and marking papers, and a great deal of time responding and discussing student writings with the writers themselves" (201). By "conferencing" teacher and student have the work in front of them and can openly exchange their questions and answers without misinterpretation. Teachers can guide students through the writing process, instead of telling them about it through formal teaching techniques. As Donald Murray points out in "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference," "Each year I teach less and less, and my students seem to learn more" (14).

Many teachers have already abandoned the traditionally based classroom in favor of daily conferencing. Others don't know how to integrate conferencing into their classrooms effectively, would like to do more, but believe that there is too little time, and some instructors believe that anytime they talk to a student at all this constitutes conferencing.

When I was going through my transformation two years ago, I became curious about the attitudes other teachers have concerning the effectiveness of their current approach in teaching writing. I wanted to know if the majority of teachers approached writing instruction traditionally as I had or whether a number had begun to explore alternate posibilities through "conferencing" with students more regularly or by turning the entire class into a "conferencing" workshop. I wanted to know what the current beliefs and practices of "conferencing" in the composition classroom were and conducted a survey of 100 full-time instructors of writing at eleven different colleges ranging in size and region: Ball State University, Carnegie-Mellon University, Eastern Oregon State College, Jacksonville University, Lander College, Moorhead State University, North Dakota State University, Ohio State University, University of Idaho, University of Tennessee, and West Georgia College.

I first began the survey trying to trace the need for conferencing by validating, through teacher response, that as instructors we reach only a certain percentage of our students during a given class session and that our traditional strategy for teaching writing, talking while our students listen, isn't always effective. The survey, charting the number and type of responses, provides a mathematical interpretation of the results.

Table 1

CONFERENCING QUESTIONNAIRE

The following are questions about "conferencing" asked of approximately 100 instructors at eleven institutions ranging in size and region:

Ball State University, Carnegie-Mellon University, Eastern Oregon State College, Jacksonville University, Lander College, Moorhead State University, North Dakota State University, Ohio State University, University of Idaho, University of Tennessee, and West Georgia College.

1. Approximately how much time during each class period do you spend in front of your class either lecturing, leading a discussion, or working with students on mechanics?
   A. 75 - 100% -- 40%
   B. 50 - 75% -- 33%
   C. 50% or below -- 22%
   D. The class consists of "conferencing" workshops; there is very little lecture -- 5%

2. Do you believe that your present method of writing instruction is effective? Why?
   A. Yes -- 67%
   B. No -- 11%
   C. So/So -- 22%

3. In your estimation what percentage of your class really listens to your discussion?
   A. 75 - 100% -- 44%
   B. 50 - 75% -- 48%
   C. 50% or less -- 8%

4. Do you believe that your present method of writing instruction enables you to reach every student? Why? Why not?
   A. Yes -- 26%
   B. No -- 55%
   C. Not certain -- 12%
   D. Yes, because I "conference" with students -- 7%

5. Approximately how often do you "conference" with a student about his/her writing during a quarter or a semester?
   A. Never -- 0
   B. Once -- 16%
   C. Twice -- 28%
   D. Several times -- 29%
   E. The class is a lab where you "conference" with students daily or at least several time a week -- 9%
   F. Other -- 9%

   Combination of the above:
   AD. 2% CE. 2%
   CD. 2% DE. 3%

6. Do you "conference" with students:
   A. when they have chronic writing problems as a means to eliminate them -- 5%
   B. when they are in danger of failing the course because of poor paper grades or poor attendance -- 3%
   C. at mid-term and final times to discuss their grades and progress in the course --5%
   D. regularly, as part of your writing program -- 47%
   E. Other (please specify)

   Combinations of the above:

ABCD.	5%	ACD.	3%
ABC.	3%	AD.	3%
AB.	5%	AC.	2%
ABD.	8%	ACE.	1%
ABE.	3%	ABDE.	1%

7. If you don't "conference" with students as often as you'd like is this because:
   A. of time constraints -- 75%
   B. you are unsure how to effectively integrate "conferencing" into your composition course -- 22%
   C. past experience has been frustrating -- 4%
   D. other (please specify) -- 8%

   Combinations of the above:

AC.	7%
AB.	2%
ABCD.	2%

8. Where do you "conference" with students?
   A. Your office -- 32%
   B. The classroom -- 2%
   C. Sometimes the classroom and sometimes the office -- 38%
   D. Other (please specify) -- 4%

   Combinations of the above:

AB.	9%	AC.	2%
AD.	5%	ABC.	2%
ABCD.	1%	BD.	2%
CD.	3%		

9. Do you see "conferencing" with students about their writing as being valuable, perhaps even more valuable than writing comments on their papers? Why?
   A. Students have trouble transferring comments on paper to revision strategies.
   B. Written comments offer no chance for an exchange to clarify confusing points.
   C. Students listen better than they can or will read.
   D. One can go through more in ten minutes than one can write in the widest margin.
   E. Conferencing allows for <u>real</u> communication to occur.
   F. Written comments do little more than justify the grade earned on a paper; dialogue with a student enables more.

G. Conferences are the most valuable method of teaching students about writing because the contact between teacher and student allows more freedom to explain why something [in an essay] is not as good as it could be.
H. Students don't always understand written comments on paper to correct mistakes. In conference, instructors can make students see what needs to be corrected.
I. Conferencing provides immediate feedback so I know if my students understand the problem.
J. I learn more about writing from my students while conferencing than I do writing my own commentary.
K. It's too easy for them not to read the comments. You can force them to respond when you've got them face-to-face.
L. Conferencing is more personal, and more can be explained to a student verbally as opposed to writing other meaningless comments on an essay.
M. Individual conferences are the most valuable single activity for students with problems. A line-by-line critique/ exploration of a paper with a student communicates more about good writing than any other activity.

10. What kinds of questions do you ask your students about their writing during a "conference," and what do you hope to accomplish during such a session?
A. What works for you in your writing and what doesn't?
B. What do you like about this writing?
C. Where do you go from here with your writing?
D. What was your intention?
E. What are you writing about?
F. What is the purpose of the essay?
G. Why would you want people to read your writing?
H. What will the reader learn from your writing?
I. What are you trying to do to your reader here: persuade, convince, affect him in a certain way, inform?
J. Who are you writing to?
K. What does the reader know about your subject?
L. Do you understand my [the instructor's] written comments?
M. How do you view your own writing?
N. How do you feel about writing in general?
O. How effective did you think this paper was?
P. Did you like this paper?
Q. Did you enjoy reading it? Writing It?
R. Where are details and explanations about your writing needed?
S. What is your thesis? Where is it supported? Unsupported?
T. What do you feel is changing in your writing?

For question one, asking how much time during a class period teachers either lecture, lead a discussion on work with students on mechanics, I found that the majority of people surveyed responded that they spend at least 75% of each class period either lecturing or discussing writing with students. The emphasis was on discussion, however. Few instructors routinely deliver lectures about

writing. And few openly discuss grammar and mechanics with students, only when needed. Usually grammar is taught using the compositions themselves. It was stressed by many instructors that their teaching methods vary, depending on the demands of specific writing assignments and the types of composition classes they are asked to teach. Several commented that they are integrating writing workshops or response groups into their teaching program in conjunction with traditional teaching methods.

Nearly every instructor surveyed responded to the second question, asking whether teachers believe their current methods of writing instruction to be effective, with a resounding yes. As one collegue wrote, "what writing instructor would answer this question with a no?" And another even more confident writing instructor replied, "Of course it's effective; I'm a terrific guy." For the most part, everyone, those using conventional teaching methods, such as lecturing and discussion and those trying to use more conferencing/workshop teaching methods believed that what they were doing in the classroom was effective, although they would like to begin to integrate more conferencing into their curriculum, and since most I surveyed used the traditional method, this approach is still believed to be a very satisfactory way to teach writing. And, as instructors indicated, tests, overall improvement on essay and student evaulations bear out the success of their teaching methods. Those who spend little time lecturing or discussing, but who regularly talk with their students about their writing praised the success of such an approach with comments such as "a lot of one-on-one conferencing and peer-responding builds builds espirit de corps," and as one individual succinctly stated, "Conferencing is cool." A few, and almost a few too many, perhaps due to the nature of the questionnaire, apologized for not conferencing enough and blamed this, in part, on the constraints of policies and rules within their English Departments and the number of courses taught per term. As one instructor emphasized: "We need more conference time,

but I have four sections of writing classes." And as another reinforced, "I would like to see more collaborative learning and 'supervised' revision going on. By that I mean more class time devoted to both. We should find more time (I hope) when the university changes from quarters to semesters."

While most teachers are probably "comfortable" with their methods of teaching, a lot of those who responded "yes" to the success of their instruction indicated that they would welcome new approaches and see conferencing in its variety of forms as beneficial. Many acknowledged that at the end of the term, they have a need, once again, to try some new teaching strategy, to reevaluate their current approaches to teaching writing, to try something, anything that will work better for both teacher and students so that students will provide some significant, or at least noticeable improvement in their writing. And, while at first, teachers responded confidentially to this question with yes, most provided lengthy details either justifying their current methods or, evaluating or asking for other teaching alternatives. In some ways, this response from one Ohio State instructor best sums up teachers' attitudes towards students' improvement during a composition course: "Basically, some of them even kinda, sorta, maybe improve."

The response to question three, asking what percentage of a class really listens to the class discussion, was varied. Not suprisingly, no one answered that 100% of a class was a captive audience, and few instructors believed that their discussions were engaging a majority of their students. Most believed that 75% or less were listening to every word during the class period. For the most part, teachers believed that their projections were optimistic, and I got the distinct impression that just like me, they'd never really thought about this question. Such thoughts are too personally defeating, making this an undesirable question to answer. Most teachers of writing take their jobs seriously and take for granted that their students are listening. As one instructor

remarked, "This is a rotten question; I don't even want to think my students aren't listening to me."

Interestingly, several instructors made the distinction between the number of students who "listen" and those who "hear"; the percentage for "hearing" students was always lower. And, one instructor indicated that approximately 50% listen in class, but is certain that about 85% can be reached one-on-one through "conferencing." And, one less than optimistic instructor just hoped that 80% of his students weren't spending the entire period playing hangman.

The greatest amount of discrepancy exists in question four, where teachers were asked to determine if their writing instruction enabled them to reach every student. While most teachers believe that their approach to writing is effective and that they have won the attention of more than half of their students during the class period, the majority believe that they don't or can't reach all of their students; some believe that students are simply "unreachable"; and others noted that, "not everything works for everybody." As one instructor aptly stated, especially for this survey, "Students have too many things on their minds.

It was this question, too, that allowed instructors the space to express many of their frustrations about teaching writing: lack of student preparation, student immaturity, time constraints, unrealistic departmental policies, too many classes, and too many papers to grade. And, I think, because it is such a frustrating issue, many teachers focused the blame on the students. As one insructor cited, "the possibility to reach everyone exists, and as teachers, that is our goal, but herein lies the root of some of our frustration. Can we really reach every eighteen year old in our composition class or do we have to? After-all, we are making the effort to present the material; students should make the effort to do something useful with it."

The consistency that did exist for this question lay within the answers from those teachers who do confer regularly with students, and they credit their

positive results in the classroom to "conferencing." Some instructors cited the need for more conferencing, as one collegue noted, "Not every student can be reached; we would need more conference time for that." One comment from a University of Idaho professor appropriately sums up many of the reactions to this question:

> I believe this is a slippery question. Teachers simply cannot know [whether they are reaching their students] with absolute certainty. Surely it seems dogmatic to say "yes" I reach all my students when the truth probably lies elsewhere. Individuals may be gently influenced by the smallest, most seemingly trivial event--this influence may show up years later. On the surface, some students do resist being "reached." The backrow, corner kid who remains listless despite all efforts. Here, the individual conference can elevate the teacher's intensity and increase the student's involvement.

When I initiated the survey, I originally wanted to know how may instructors use conferencing as the primary teaching strategy for their composition courses, either as an in-class workshop or as an office consultation about work in progress. And, I had hoped there would be a high number of responses indicating the adoption of such an approach. But, questions five through eight reveal that out of the 100 individuals I surveyed, only about six percent have abandoned traditional methods of teaching writing in favor of the conferencing workshop where writing is discussed on a regular, daily basis. It is encouraging, however, to discover that while almost no one is incorporating small group conferencing or the conferencing workshop as an alternative method for teaching writing, the majority of those I surveyed arrange conferences with students several times a term. And, under question seven, asking instructors to state their reasons for not conferencing with students as often as they liked instructors often included a note requesting more information about integrating conferencing more regularly into their classes. Usually, conferencing is viewed as a separate activity removed from the classroom, a valuable practice that is held in conjunction with regular classroom teaching, if there is time. Essentially,

there is a time to teach writing, another time to talk with students about their writing.

While instructors indicated that they "conference" regularly with their students, either because they see the value of such a procedure or because their departments demand frequent conferencing, nearly all listed that they don't confer with students as often as necessary because of time constraints. Basically instructors do "confer" with students, but since they schedule separate conferences, the number of conferences are limited. As a result, instructors interpreted the "conference" as to "confer," meaning that they deem a conference as any time they talk with a student about writing concerns. Instructors frequently take advantage of the "teachable moment," that time when lightening finally strikes, and a student has a question regarding writing, whether that question occurs in the classroom, in the hallway on the way to class, over the phone, or whether it evolves out of a formal office conference. While most conferences are arranged as per student request or instructor invitation, and occur either in the office or during class, some instructors like to schedule conferences in neutral territory, thus reducing student/teacher barriers. Some conferences are held at university museums, bookstores, on campus grounds, or while munching salad at the school commons. And as Thom Hawkins, Director of the Writing Lab at the University of California-Berkeley points out, "Some of the best discussions about writing occur when food is involved" (Northwest Writing Lab Conference, 1986).

Other than through conferencing, one of the only times that we make personal contact with our students is when we mark their papers. But even in that process we alienate them by spiriting off their work to some secret place where we mark them in blood red until that awful day we return them, always at the end of class as if we were issuing a summons. And, ironically, to further complicate this process, as teachers of writing our own written communication with students

about their papers is often too diffuse and vague for them or even ourselves to understand. We clutter their papers with composition jargon like lack of unity, focus, dangling modifers, split infinitives, or have "awk" honking its way throughout the pages. Conferencing remedies all of these problems, and for this reason, nearly all surveyed believed that conferencing with students about their writing was more valuable than providing written comments on essays. During conferencing, students and teachers can discuss, equally, a piece of writing, each one asking questions, each one learning from the writing process. Students are a captive audience so there is little room for a gap in the delivery and the reception of information, a gap that exists in the classroom, allowing that 80% to escape into the realm of daydreaming and doodling while information about the writing process is simply lost in space. As one of the instructors in the survey remarked, "One can go through more in ten minutes than one can write in the widest margin."

The questions most frequently asked by those surveyed of their students during a writing conference have been listed in Table 1. Since one of the benefits of the writing conference is for students to discuss their writing with their teachers in on open, hopefully honest exchange, many instructors indicated that they go about this process by initiating questions that allow student response, so that students can talk about their writing rather than the teacher. Instructors expressed that ideally students should be able to direct the conference themselves after a few opening questions, using their instrutors as a resource to validate strengths and weaknesses in writing. Most of the questions ask students not only to evaluate their own writing but to acknowledge that they are writers themselves, that their writing is an extension of their thought-process and that they should want to develop feelings of pride in their work. If nothing else, these questions show them that they are responsible for what they write.

Overall, teachers of writing, or at least those I surveyed, are in favor of conferencing; however, from what I could determine from the research, most writing teachers are using conferencing in conjunction with traditionally based classroom practices. Instructors sometimes meet with students about their writing several times a quarter during scheduled office visits, visits that I'm sure are generally helpful, but are not regular enough to form consistent communication about writing. Some conferencing takes place in the classroom; however, while this seems to be of a less formal nature and may consist of regular contact about a student's writing when asked or in the form of group editing sessions organized by the instructor, it is not prolonged one on one contact. Almost no one seems to be working the "less is more" approach advocated by Donald Murray who ceased to teach formally but only confered in his office with students about their writing or by Roger Garrison in One-to-One: Making Writing Instruction Effective who has completely turned his classroom into a workshop where teachers and students or students and their peers confer about writing. There is no question that conferencing is valuable, but right now teachers probably don't use it as effectively or as often as possible, perhaps because they are unsure how to use classroom time for conferencing. Many seem to be trapped by the confines of traditional teaching methods where they do much of the talking, the student does much of the listening and writing occurs during the interum, to be whisked away, graded and returned with instructive comments. Obviously there is nothing wrong with this traditional structure; it's been used for centuries, but it may be time to acknowledge that teaching less really could mean learning more.

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